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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses various ways in which literature can be incorporated with world geography to make better connections across the curriculum. Reasons to use a literature-based approach to teach geography include: (1) there is a natural link between geography and literature; (2) the study of literature improves comprehension of geography; and (3) a literature-based approach to geography improves reading comprehension. Suggestions are given for choosing appropriate pieces of literature with a model presented for using John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." (EH)

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Using Literature to Teach Geography in High Schools

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Traditionally, the high school curriculum has been rigidly compartmentalized. Yet, linkages between disciplines in the curriculum increasingly are being made, such as the connections of English to U.S. History courses in many high schools. Another connection may be English with World Geography courses. Students of every ability level could benefit from exploring the interrelationship between these two disciplines.

In this ERIC Digest, the term literature refers to novels, short stories, poetry, plays, and folk tales. It consists of narrative as opposed to expository forms of writing that are found in traditional textbooks, reference books, and news articles. By no means, however, should literature be the sole tool used to teach geography or other subjects of the social studies. Rather, each form of narrative and expository writing has its place in the social studies curriculum.

Why Use Literature to Teach Geography? Advocates present three main reasons for using a literature-based approach to teach geography.

1. There is a natural link between geography and literature. Author and teacher Kenneth Mitchell eloquently describes this link: "Geography has a profound influence in shaping any society....[L]iterature, like all art, is ultimately a reflection and illustration of the landscape that produced it" (Mallory & Simpson-Housley 1986, 23).

How does this natural link apply to the classroom? Virtually every story has a setting that can be expressed in geographical terms. With a literature-based approach to geography, each discipline can enrich and reinforce learning in the other. Students also can begin to see that both geography and literature have relevance outside the classroom.

2. The study of literature improves comprehension of geography. Research has shown that geographic awareness among students is influenced more by travel experience than by any other factor (Bein 1990). Obviously, it is impossible to take every student on a tour of the world. The challenge is to create a learning environment that comes closest to being in a place. Literature comes nearer to achieving this goal than most other resources. Even audio-visual materials cannot explicitly convey the smells, tastes, and other sensations of a place as can a well-written piece of literature.

Several advocates of a literature-based approach to geography argue that students are more likely to understand geographical concepts if they have real people and situations to use as models (Friend & Thompson 1986, McGowan & Guzzetti 1991, Silverman 1981). Textbooks typically bombard the reader with densely packed concepts and superficial explanations (Ornstein 1992, 168). Literature, by contrast, allows students to focus and reflect upon a few concepts at a time (McGowan & Guzzetti 1991, 17).

In 1984, the Joint Committee on Geographic Education developed the five themes of geography: location, place, human/environmental interaction, movement, and regions. At least one of the five themes can be found in every piece of literature (Fitzhugh 1992, 5).

3. A literature-based approach to geography improves reading comprehension. In a typical high school classroom, students' reading abilities can range from a fourth- or fifth-grade level to the equivalent of a college junior. The use of a single textbook is inappropriate for the reading levels of many, if not most, students. Students who read materials other than textbooks in their classes demonstrate a broader vocabulary and greater reading comprehension than if they use textbooks alone (Smith, Monson, & Dobson 1992, 370). Further, narrative is usually more intriguing and enjoyable to read than expository forms of writing. A piece of literature is more likely than a textbook to capture students' interests and imaginations. Students taught with a literature-based approach have better attitudes toward reading (Smith, Monson, & Dobson 1992, 370).

Choosing Appropriate Pieces of Literature. Each teacher needs to develop his or her own guidelines or criteria for choosing appropriate literature to use in a geography classroom. Knowing the special needs of one's students and clearly defining course objectives are both important factors. For instance, Friend and Thompson consider the work's literary quality, geographical value, and character appeal for their students (1986). McGowan and Guzzetti add that they look for materials which avoid stereotypical and inaccurate information (1991, 18). Palmer and Smith have developed a geo-literature model that contains a six-step strategy for choosing and using literature to understand the National Geography Standards (1995, 2).

At least one additional factor should be considered when choosing a piece of literature: Was it written by a person who lives in that place or region? Many American authors, especially of books for young readers, write about places in the world that they may have briefly visited, or perhaps they have never gone to these places. These books may be well written and accurate. Yet, what better way to teach students about a place than through the voice of someone who lives there? Just as students profit from exposure to a variety of reading materials, they can also benefit from a variety of perspectives (Ornstein 1992, 68). Books written by authors from around the world are readily available. However, one should be careful never to sacrifice

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literary quality and content relevance in the interest of finding an indigenous author.

Suggestions for Using THE GRAPES OF WRATH to Teach Geography. The writings of John Steinbeck have traditionally been a staple of high school English departments. His work has valuable applications for the high school geography classroom as well. Whether used in its entirety or through excerpts, THE GRAPES OF WRATH provides an excellent vehicle with which to teach many of the 1994 National Geography Standards. With these standards in mind, the following is a small sample of the questions that students can explore as they read the novel.

- What images come to mind upon hearing the words "Oklahoma" and "California?" What did these words mean to Americans in the 1930s?
- What physical and human characteristics define eastern Oklahoma and California's Central Valley? What role has irrigation played in shaping the landscape and economic development of the Central Valley?
- What factors contributed to the transition from small family farms to large commercial farms in both Oklahoma and California? What human and environmental forces drove the Joads and other families from their land in Oklahoma, and what drew them to California?
- In the 1930s, what attitudes did people in western states have toward the arrival of migrant workers? Can parallels be drawn between those attitudes and the attitudes toward migrants today?
- How have the features and functions of Highway 66 changed from the migration of farm families to southern California in the 1930s, to the 1940s when Nat King Cole sang his famous song about ROUTE 66, to the 1960s when the interstate system was established, and to the present day when the once-famous highway has virtually disappeared?
- Through which towns, cities, and states did Highway 66 pass? When people drive from Chicago to Los Angeles today, which interstate highways do they take? Which towns on Highway 66 were bypassed with the construction of the interstate system? How were those places affected economically and socially?

Steinbeck describes the land and its people in such vivid detail that the study of geography becomes a natural extension of the literature. Through the GRAPES OF WRATH, geography takes on new relevance as well as aesthetic beauty.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia, 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, announced monthly in the CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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